

## Trigger Warnings Trigger Me

By Laurie Essig

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(adapted from the original)

- 1 Trigger warnings. I first encountered them about five years ago. We were reading a book about disordered eating. I showed images of high-fashion models next to pro-anorexic images to illustrate the idea that our culture's ideal beauty is not really that different from an anorexic body. Two young women in the class told me I should have given a trigger warning since women with eating disorders could have experienced psychological duress from the images. It was my duty, apparently, to make sure no one was ever disturbed by my class. A couple of years later I showed images of Abu Ghraib in a different class. Again: Images of torture could trigger someone. I tried to make a joke. "You know what's worse than images of torture? Being tortured." They didn't laugh. Ever since then, I more or less try to avoid showing anything too upsetting.
- 2 What started out as a slow trickle of trigger warnings is now a tsunami. As Amanda Marcotte pointed out, this is the Year of the Trigger Warning. Trigger warnings began on feminist blogs as a way of warning readers that the content contained material about domestic violence or rape or even disordered eating. According to a young feminist blogger acquaintance of mine, it made sense to give trigger warnings since reading a blog should not cause any damage. And that's reasonable. But then trigger warnings spread. And spread. A virus of warnings infected blogs, public art, and now classrooms.
- 3 Some students and professors argue that nearly everything should come with a trigger warning. *Mrs. Dalloway*? Trigger warning: suicidal tendencies. *The Great Gatsby*? Trigger warning: suicide, domestic abuse, graphic violence. Think I'm making this up? I'm not. Those warnings come from a student op-ed in Rutgers's *The Daily Targum*. It seems absurd, like an article in *The Onion*, the jokey fake newspaper. To add to the Kafkaesque irony of it all, some people want *The Onion* to come with trigger warnings too.
- 4 Not only should all that we read or show in our classes come with trigger warnings, but also apparently anything can be a trigger. A Wellesley alumna, blogging about a statue of a sleepwalking man in his

## This Is a Trigger Warning

By Angela Shaw-Thornburg

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- 1 My earliest memory: I am a small girl, prone on a bed. Sunlight is streaming through the windows, sending streaks of gold and amber across the pinewood floors of my family's brick house on a country road. The floor is so clean that it shines. My mother mops the floors of the house in the hours after we go to bed, and she sings softly while she does it. Her voice is usually the last sound I hear before I go to sleep.
- 2 When I look at the floor this time, I hear her singing in my head. She isn't home. She is away at her job in town, at the Piggly Wiggly, to help my sweet bear of a father keep the lights on in our house. Her voice is golden, and I need it now to take me away from what is happening to me. I am being touched in a way that literally tears at me, and I don't understand why this is happening or why it cannot be told.
- 3 These were my first memories. I am broken from the beginning. Shiny wood floors, random R&B, and the Motown tunes that my mother used to sing as she made our home clean can make me broken again, even after all this time.
- 4 I am 12. It is summer, and I am on the floor, supine. I am struggling so hard that my body breaks out in great goutts of sweat. I am fighting my attacker because I know that if he manages to unwrench the tight twist I have made of my legs, I will be irredeemable. I lose, and every early summer from the time I am 12 until this, my 40th year, I unravel. The season itself is what tips me over into darkness.
- 5 I am 16, maybe 17. In science class I am learning about the "miracle of life," with the permission of my parents, who signed the necessary papers as they do every year. We are watching a film in which a woman is giving birth, and, just for a moment, I see the bloody curve of the baby's head as it pushes its way into the world. My head, hands, and feet go hot, then cold, as I imagine how this push for life must tear at her. I go blank.
- 6 I am 25, in a graduate class on the Victorian first-person narrative. My love for Victorian writers is as old as the first time I read *A Tale of Two Cities*, and I

underwear that many students said had triggered them, argued that:

Triggers can be anything. You don't get to pick them, and there's not always a clear explanation as to why something is a trigger. For a while, I couldn't go into any grocery store without having a panic attack, for no discernible reason. I've never been attacked in a grocery store, and yet the produce aisle now gives me anxiety. No idea.

- 5 So no literature or readings that might upset anyone, no movies or advertisements or songs, and oh, by the way, you never know what might trigger someone, so you'd better just be prepared for anything you do or say or even eat to result in a student demanding you stop because it's triggering for them.
- 6 I am the first person to admit that I'm an insensitive jerk, but the next person who says "trigger warning" to me is going to get sucker-punched. Oops, I should have put a TW on that: violence. OK, is going to get a serious talking to about the relationship between the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary. (TW: Lacanian theory may cause headaches.)
- 7 I insist that there is a difference between an act and its representation. Let me put it this way: A character in a novel who beats his wife or a sociological study of domestic abuse is not the same thing as getting beaten. It demeans and diminishes real trauma to argue that consuming literature, art, history, and social science is an act of violence.
- 8 Trigger warnings are a very dangerous form of censorship because they're done in the name of civility. Learning is painful. It's often ugly and traumatic. How different my life would be if I hadn't read *Crime and Punishment* because it's misogynist and violent. How terrible my teaching would be if I hadn't spent years researching spectacle lynchings and eugenics and freak shows in order to teach courses on race and American culture.
- 9 And if there's one thing that my research has taught me, it is that many of the ugliest pieces of our past and our present are centered on the figure of the lady: delicate, pure, and vulnerable (and always in need of protection). This is important because most trigger warnings come from young women. We are told it is our duty and obligation to protect them since they

am enthralled with my professor, who is kind and encourages me with my writing.

- 7 I do fine in the class—more than fine, in fact—until we get to the weeks when we read a memoir detailing the sexual history of an upper-crust Victorian who exploits girls and women to satisfy himself.
- 8 I am curled up in my bed reading, so when I blank out this time, there is no danger of my falling. I must have read the book and gone to class, but I don't remember the first sex/rape scene (the distinction is blurred in the work; that I remember). I do remember feeling as if some blunt force had struck the front part of my brain. In the weeks that follow, I am all animal. I eat infrequently and refuse to bathe because I cannot bear to touch my own body.
- 9 When I stuff my seminar paper under my professor's door weeks after it is due, I attach a letter explaining that the narrator of the sexual history shares an uncanny resemblance to the person who raped me when I was 12, and that although I know the intellectual difference between fact and fiction, between my story and the strangely complementary story of this memoirist, I found myself so damaged by the reading that I lost my capacity to write for a while. I never hear back from her, but I do well in the class. It takes me months to right my ship.
- 10 I am 40. I am reading an article in *The Chronicle* about how much the author hates the advent of trigger warnings. They are, says the author—along with online comments in response to her piece and similar anti-trigger-warning essays that appear sporadically over the spring—a sign of political correctness run amok. Trigger warnings are, they assert, an attempt to tamper with free speech, and just an excuse for students who don't want to do their work or to confront difficult material.
- 11 I have been in therapy on and off since I was 25 and have the benefit of several decades of learning how to push my voice out into the world when I am feeling most silenced. But still, the arrogance and lack of compassion in these essays stun me into silence. It is as if the work done by Elaine Scarry and many other respected theorists on the impact of trauma on language, the body, perception, and human experience had not been written.

have posttraumatic-stress disorder and therefore cannot handle the anxiety produced by that which might upset them.

- <sup>10</sup> I would like to insist that young women can in fact deal with the pain of a fully engaged classroom. I have faith that they are not delicate flowers in need of my protection, but rather strong beings who can learn to deal with their very real pain.
- <sup>11</sup> The world is a painful and anxiety-inducing place, and human representations of the world are often painful to consume. But rather than retreating into a world where our courses are reduced to viewings of My Little Pony, let's all put on our big-girl panties (or big-boy tighty whities, as in the case of the Wellesley statue) and face that world together. Let's talk about it, think about it, write about it, analyze it, and, in the end, learn to engage fully with all of it, even those parts that cause us to curl up in pain and sob. Because that's what a real education requires, and limiting ourselves to pretty images of rainbow ponies is not enough to know the world.

<sup>12</sup> I finally decide to post a comment on *The Chronicle's Vitae* to try to explain: Telling students who come to our classes with severe traumas that often leave them with post-traumatic stress disorder to just suck it up is not a reasonable response to what trauma does to you. These students deserve the chance to take care of themselves. I couch my argument in terms of best practices for adapting teaching for students with invisible disabilities.

<sup>13</sup> Beyond that single letter I wrote to my professor in grad school, I have never written or spoken publicly about the abuse I survived. I never told a single college professor about why I would disappear for weeks after being required to view or read narratives of violent sexual encounters.

<sup>14</sup> I struggle for months to figure out why all these anti-trigger essays challenge my view of myself as an English professor and the future of the profession in general. Then, while reading Adrienne Rich's poem "Power" one day, in preparation for a class, I finally get it. Rich closes her poem about Marie Curie this way:

She died a famous woman denying  
her wounds  
denying  
her wounds came from the same source as her  
power

<sup>15</sup> I am an earnest, somewhat old-fashioned English professor. I am a true believer: Language is powerful, images even more so. A word or an image is as capable of triggering hurt or delivering violence as a fired gun. To blithely introduce powerful, rousing images of violence into your classroom, to tell your students that these words and images are worthy of thought and study (and they are), and then to deny that such stuff might at least bruise those students is the worst kind of hypocrisy for those whose stock in trade is the word. Our students deserve better.